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Book Reviews and Conference Papers

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Abstract

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Book Reviews

Christopher Koch, *The Dobleman*. London: Chatto & Windus, April 1985. £8.95.

The Doubleman is a gripping study in enchantment, explicitly permeated with fairy lore which is simul-taneously rooted in precisely depicted common experience. It is a measure of Christopher Koch's art that he manages skillfully to integrate the two modes so that the story's allusiveness is never distracting: rather it deepens the reader's understanding of the characters and their predicament, so that the two aspects of the book combine in an original and insightful vision.

Christopher Koch did something similar in his previous novel, where he drew together the traditional Javanese shadow puppet theatre, *wayang kulit*, with the story of Sukarno's fall, allowing the first to give shape to the second. In *The Doubleman* this strategy is more extensively developed and more generally illuminating. *The Year of Living Dangerously* was, in a sense, an exotic tale: *The Doubleman*, though it takes place in the antipodes and makes use of sharply differentiated settings in Hobart and Sydney, is an exemplary tale which touches the experience of everyone who underwent the cultural disruption of the fifties and sixties. These decades, it will be remembered, culminated in the sinister fairy tale of Magical Mystery tours and psychedelic experience. Christopher Koch's new novel is, amongst other things, a fictional investigation of this pursuit of strange gods and spiritual shortcuts which has become a pervasive, and accepted, aspect of recent Western culture.

The revival of interest in fairies which goes along with other supernatural preoccupations has usually emphasised the *glamour* of fairyland, particularly as it was depicted by certain late nineteenth century or decadent illustrators whose work is sometimes retrospectively regarded as foreshadowing — or somehow linked with — the visionary images inspired by psychedelic drugs. But fairies, as they are described in traditional ballads and folk-tales are sinister and dangerous because of their seductive intercourse with human beings. *The Doubleman* traces the fortunes of a group of people who are seduced by the *glamour* and succumb to its sinister results. They are either enthralled, or in the case of Darcy Burr, obsessed with the possibly supernatural power which will enable them to hold others in thrall.

The book sustains a carefully articulated match between the realistic story and fairy tale, which is made explicit through the use of epigraphs from traditional ballads and passages which explain certain parallels in the story. For example, the narrator's infantile paralysis which is realistically depicted at the beginning of the novel is related to the lore about changelings in a later passage. Such passages are not, incidentally, over-explanatory; they arise naturally from the narrator's conscious interest in fairy lore as he grows up in the sixties. The fairy tale dimension of the book is therefore motivated by the development of character, and the book traces the psychological aspects of belief in the supernatural. At the same time, certain fairy tale motifs contribute to its incidental and overall structure. Three are made quite explicit: 'The False Knight Upon the Road', 'Thomas the Rhymer' and 'Tam Lin'; others will no doubt emerge from close reading and study.

At the centre of the novel are the narrator, Richard Miller, and his two Tasmanian friends who later form a pop-music group with two others; the narrator's Estonian wife, Katrin, and the stepson of the woman who once enchanted him. The novel turns on the artfully chosen narrative angle, for the narrator is involved with the others, yet partly separated from them, since he does not belong to the pop group (though for a time he is its producer). This enables Christopher Koch to tell two interwoven stories: one of the narrator's enchantment, beginning in childhood; the other of the development of the pop group whose songs based on fairy ballads sound a resonant note in the cultural confusion of the late sixties. It also facilitates the drawing of fine distinctions in the narrator's relationships with the others, and in particular to the two Tasmanians: the school hero, Brady, who resists enchantment and Darcy Burr, the increasingly sinister Puckish disciple of the doubleman, Broderick.

The first of these stories, which defines the scope of the novel, focusses on the narrator's psychological development. His enchantment begins during his convalescence from infantile paralysis. Cut off from others by this, his imagination evolves around his toy theatre and fairy stories, particularly a couple of Danish tales which he finds in a collection which is possibly Thomas Keightly's *The Fairy Mythology*.[1] An important allusive thread — the link between enchantment and art — is thus established from the beginning. At the same time, the art of the book is shaped by fairy narratives. The opening scene, for example, where the crippled Richard Miller encounters the figure who turns out to be the doubleman, is, as the sub-title makes clear, an explicit counterpart to the opening motif of the ballad 'The False Knight Upon the Road'. Many — probably most — of the incidents in the book have this extra dimension, but an important aspect of Christopher Koch's narrative strategy is the way their allusiveness is played down, even when it is sometimes made explicit. The incidents and scenes stand up in their own right; they do not need the allusions, though they are enriched by them.

The account of the narrator's enchantment is developed in detail as he falls under the spell of the woman Deidre and of the Broderick, and becomes involved in Darcy Burr's pursuit of power through both fame and the supernatural. This illuminates the other story in the book: the account of the success of the pop group in a milieu in which a spiritual breakdown exposes people to the *glamour* of the fairy world and to other forms of superstitious cultishness, and through the coinidence of the two stories, Christopher Koch suggests an interpretation of this disturbing phase of recent Western culture.

The Doubleman is an intricately structured novel in which every element is precisely motivated and related. Other recent revisions of fairy tales have often been an excuse for abandoning the constraints of realistic fiction, but Christopher Koch has set himself the more difficult problem of telling a credible (and richly suggestive) story which has the attributes of a fairy tale. This is not a 'playful' book, but one in which the allusive dimension is always motivated by the depiction of character, incident and setting. Christopher Koch is a master of 'tea-tabling' as it was understood by E.M. Forster; this is, essentially, a fictional mode in which everything — and especially sensational incidents and profundities — is precisely understated. There is a fashion just now for novels which proclaim their own artifice and loudly compel the reader to applaud their innovations. The noise these generate should not obscure the qualities of finer work like *The Doubleman*, which contains great depths in a beautifully articulated narrative.

BRUCE CLUNIES ROSS

NOTE

1. I am indebted to my colleague, Mr James Stewart for pointing out to me this possible source, and for identifying the two Danish ballads as 'Elverskud' (the Danish title is untranslatable, but means a mortal wound as a result of being shot by an arrow fired by elves) and 'Hr Bøsmer i elvehjem' (Sir Bosmere in the land of the elves).

Barbara Hanrahan, *Kewpie Doll.* London: Chatto & Windus, 1984. £2.95.

Kewpie Doll, Barbara Hanrahan's eighth book in just over ten years, is described by her publishers as a novel, though like her first, it has the attributes of autobiography. It recapitulates and even revises images and incidents from the earlier book in a way that identifies its narrator with the Hanrahan who relates the explicitly autobiographical *The Scent of Eucalyptus* (1973), and the same circle of family and friends appears in both books. At its centre are the grandmother, great-aunt Reece — a victim of Down's syndrome — and the widowed mother. The two books are subjective accounts of a girl growing up in this family in Adelaide during the war and post-war years, and while the first is focussed upon childhood and the second takes the story up to the narrator's twenty-third year, there is an extensive overlap between them. An important event in both, the family's move from an inner to an outer suburb, which occurs around the narrator's pubescence, concludes the first book, and is placed exactly at the centre of the second.

The later book is really only a novel in the sense that any autobiographical writing is. Christopher Isherwood once argued that the very process of recording experience pushed it towards fiction, and his own books were conscious explorations of the borderland between autobiography and the novel, but *Kewpie Doll* is nothing like them. It resembles more closely the explicitly autobiographical writings of Hal Porter. Like Porter, Barbara Hanrahan details the atmosphere of a particular place and time by reference to advertisements and popular songs, and by lists of local products like Kitchener buns, Violet Crumble Bars, Fishaphos, Nixoderm, Vicks Vapour Rub, Old Dutch Cleanser, Gumption and Pond's Vanishing Cream. Discerning readers of Australian literature will have encountered some of these already in the sketches of Barry Humphries and the writings of Patrick White and Hal Porter, amongst other places, but in *Kewpie Doll,* they will discover a specifically South Australian milieu through allusions to the Beehive corner, Balfour's cakes, Woodroffe's lemonade, Snow-Top Champagne, Menz Yo-Yo biscuits, Flower Day, Gandy and Eskimo Pies. I missed any reference to Bickford's lime juice or Faulding's Solyptol soap (though Lifebuoy is mentioned) and noticed a few inaccuracies. The deliciously cloying soft drink made to taste like passion fruit with large quantities of sugar was, as I remember, called *Passiona* and not, as the narrator remembers it, *Passionella.*

Perhaps too much of *Kewpie Doll* is filled out with this kind of naming and listing which is becoming a mannerism in Australian writing, though Barbara Hanrahan uses it like Porter, to evoke a milieu sympathetically, rather than like Humphries and White, to mock the vulgarity of Australian suburban life.

This is not the only aspect of *Kewpie Doll* which is reminiscent of Porter's autobiographies. There is occasionally a similar use of the historic present and the narrative perspec-

tive it connotes. However, where Porter's vocabulary is rich and his sentence patterns and prose rhythms complex, Barbara Hanrahan's prose in *Kewpie Doll* is composed almost entirely of simple sentences embodying single observations and images. Such writing is, of course, only apparently simple, and difficult to sustain without monotony. It depends entirely on the freshness and accuracy of the images and the effects which can be gained by linking them precisely. The very simplicity of this style makes it easy to strike a false note, and there are patches of undigested research in this book which tip over into travel brochure writing.

On the other hand, there are passages in *Kewpie Doll* where the individual details combine to evoke a rich sense of place and time. This is particularly the case with the chapters dealing with suburban life. Even these, however, are rather less complex and rhythmically varied than many passages in *The Scent of Eucalyptus*, where, for example, the rhythms of the opening paragraphs spring off from the epigraph by Marvell. Curiously, in rewriting her childhood experiences in *Kewpie Doll*, Barbara Hanrahan has simplified — I would suggest, over-simplified — her prose, and the later book is, in this respect, less successful than the first.

There are, however, compensations. Though it no doubt contains an element of fiction, the centre of interest in *Kewpie Doll* is the imaginative growth of the narrator who, we have reason to suspect, represents the young Barbara Hanrahan, and the book is skillfully organized to let this process accelerate to its climax in the closing pages. *Kewpie Doll* develops an idea which the author had already explained in *The Scent of Eucalyptus*, that she was always aware of two selves. On the one hand she is the person the world, and especially her family, want her to be; on the other, she senses a different identity inside this person. The struggle between these two selves is the dramatic focus of the book.

In this respect, the book is like a thematically conventional *Bildungsroman*, but it is a quite original version of the form. Firstly, this is because of the surprising difference between the narrator's two selves. Outwardly she is an ordinary suburban girl whose horizons are bounded by the commercial class in high school, the local picture theatre and the dissenting evangelical churches which are such a notable feature of the Adelaide suburbs. She and her family seem to be precisely the kind of people who are mocked in all the easy satires of Australian suburbia. Inwardly, she possesses a gifted imagination through which she can transform and transcend her outer experience. Whereas the typical *Bildungsroman* usually focusses upon the protagonist's inner life and his struggle *against* his environment, Barbara Hanrahan devotes a large part of *Kewpie Doll* to her narrator's outer life and suburban milieu. Her development is not depicted as a struggle *against* it; rather it is described with insight and understanding as something which nurtures an authentic aspect of the narrator's identity. *Kewpie Doll* thus gives the reader a richer inside view of the misunderstood and easily ridiculed Australian suburbs than we have ever had before, except perhaps in the author's first book, and its extensive use of naming and listing serves not only to evoke this world but also to create the values and expectations which the narrator, in her outer self, tries to meet.

Secondly, Barbara Hanrahan presents her narrator fairly passively in relation to her two selves. Admittedly, her inner self does take control at the end and she decides to follow the difficult path of the artist, but the break with the suburban world is painful and full of sadness. It is not presented as a victory, and the outer self is not rejected. Up until the end, the narrator registers both outer and inner experience neutrally. This is consistent with the sympathetic portrayal of the outer world, and perhaps justifies the extremely simple prose style.

The narrative mode of *Kewpie Doll* is child-like, and at times, childish. This no doubt

reflects Barbara Hanrahan's belief (expressed in her *Australian Literary Studies* interview with Julie Mott) in the importance of the child's vision of things, but it runs into difficulties, even in a short book like *Kewpie Doll.* There is an obvious problem of sustaining interest and avoiding a prattling tone, but beyond this, there is the danger of slipping into coyness and mannerisms. Unfortunately, these are not always avoided. Sometimes the style is cute: 'Once my mother was matron of honour at Doris from work's wedding', or 'The station-master and the girl had a baby that turned into a detective', and occasionally, it has a coy allusiveness: 'the big store in the city where they said your money went farthest' (South Australian readers will recognize this as John Martins). Expressions like the latter possibly result from a clash between the attempt to sustain a child-like tone and a tendency to over-explain the previously undescribed world of Adelaide. Something like this probably accounts for the many expressions like 'At the corner of the street is the School. First it *meant* Infants...', 'Commercial *meant* Typewriting, Shorthand, Bookkeeping', 'Teachers' College *meant* dances...' or 'The birthday parties *meant* hundreds and thousands on the cakes' (my italics), where it is pure mannerism, like the frequent use of kindergarten periphrases like 'did rape', 'did torture' and 'did murder'.

More pervasive are the non-sequiturs which might be justified as reflecting unexplained associations in the child's mind, but which do not really add up to anything because they are over-worked to the point of affectation: 'Mrs Willoughby next door askes my grandmother if I've got my period yet, the bark is flaking off the rustic fern pots, the fuchsia bush taps at the broken panes of the ruined glass-house', 'I found his name in a book in Aunty Margaret's bookcase — it was mine, not theirs (*The Lost Trail,* with a Red Indian in a canoe on the cover); I stole it away, put it down my jumper, but Roger caught me and told. I went to see the footie Grand final when I was a baby', 'so long ago it is a dream and the celluloid swan sails on the pocket mirror lake, I stole the milkjug cover fringed with glass beads, the Pierrot's costume had black pompoms.' Torn from their contexts, these passages may seem more awkward than they really are in the book, but there are too many similar examples. The initial charm of this style palls, and although Barbara Hanrahan moderates it towards the end of the book, she does not manage to control the connection between style and the developing consciousness of the protagonist with anything like the precision of, say, Joyce in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man.*

This flaws a book which is nevertheless delightful for its deep insight into Australian suburban life and its sensitive account of the growth of an artistic imagination in that milieu.

BRUCE CLUNIES ROSS

Ross McMullin, *Will Dyson: Cartoonist, Etcher and Australia's Finest War Artist.* London: Angus & Robertson, 1984. 337 pp. £16.50.

This is the first major biography of the man who is best known in Australia as her finest war artist. But, as this book reveals, he was much more than this; eventually his claim to fame may well rest on his work as a political cartoonist. Born in Australia in 1880, Dyson

came to England in 1909 in the hope of finding the recognition he had failed to find in Australia. His opportunity came when he was appointed cartoonist for the newly founded *Daily Herald* which had begun its life in 1911 as the London printers' strike sheet. Dyson's front-page cartoons together with the captions he added to them were passionate attacks on capitalism, inequality and suffering and they created a sensation. His attacks ranged far and wide: on the Labour leaders who deserted their class; on Botha, 'the man behind the gun'; on those who refused to grant women their rights. Wherever injustice existed, Dyson was there to expose it. His cartoons were printed in book form, as post cards and posters; he was acclaimed by men such as Wells, Chesterton, Shaw and Orage; the *Daily News* wrote, 'Mr Dyson, whether you like or hate him, is a force in contemporary England.'

Fiercely anti-militarist he was also patriotic and when Australia entered the war he volunteered his services as their war artist. What he produced was no false glorification of war; if in his drawings of the men of Anzac he captured the special qualities of that group, their endurence and sardonic humour, he also revealed in the tense and weary faces of his soldiers all the horrors of the Western Front and of a war in which the victims were the exploited working classes of both sides. Not surprisingly he was critical of the Versailles Treaty and his protest about it produced for the *Herald* his most famous cartoon, 'Peace and Future Cannon Fodder', in which he predicted the outcome of World War II even to the year. He left political journalism for some time but, appalled by the Depression, he entered the arena once more. This time his prime target attack was the Central Banker 'who goes to his work of sweetness and light, wrecking a nation or two here ... all in the name of a Holy Principle — the Principle of sound Banking Practice'.

Disillusioned after World War I, how much more would Dyson be today if he could see the causes for which he fought still not won and the injustices he opposed as rampant as ever. The wealth is no more evenly distributed, one half of the world sits with its mountains of grain and butter whilst the other half starves; increased technology has led, as Dyson predicted, to unemployment but it has not led to a new attitude to leisure, as he had hoped, but to resistance by employers to the 35-hour week; the armaments race continues accompanied by price increases and cuts in social welfare, 'Daddy, what makes the cost of living go up? The cost of dying, my son' (caption to Dyson cartoon). As Mrs Thatcher sees the pit strike as another Falklands with Galtieri as the enemy without and Arthur Scargill as 'the enemy within' we recall Dyson's cartoon 'Profit and His Paramour'. The caption reads, 'In times of war the Labourer and his class protects the State from peril, but in times of peace — if we may believe the theory of the Profiteers — the Labourer merely provides the peril!.'

The book is lavishly illustrated with over two hundred drawings and photographs. One point of irritation is the failure on numerous occasions of the author to provide reference notes to sources quoted. This is a surprising omission given the fact that the author is an archivist with Australian archives and a researcher himself. It is a small minus in an important book in which Dyson's message is as relevant now as when he first preached it.

ANNA RUTHERFORD

Jayanta Mahapatra, *Life Signs* (Delhi: OUP, 1983). 48 pp. £3.25.
Evan Jones, *Left at the Post* (St Lucia, Queensland: Queensland UP). 56 pp. Hb $9.95, pb $4.95.
Philip Mead, *This River Is in the South* (St Lucia, Queensland: Queensland UP, 1984). 50 pp. Hb $9.95, pb $4.95.
Syd Harrex, *Atlantis and Other Islands* (Mundelstrup, Denmark: Dangaroo Press, 1984). 47 pp. £2.50, Aus $4.95.
Nigel Roberts, *Steps for Astaire* (Sydney: Hale & Iremonger, 1983). 101 pp. No price given.
Philip Salom, *The Projectionist* (Fremantle: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1983). 88 pp. $7.50.
Roland Robinson, *Selected Poems* (Armidale, NSW: Kardoorair Press, 1983). 82 pp. $7.95.
Les A. Murray, *The People's Otherworld* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1983). 68 pp. No price given.
The Blue Wind: Poems in English from Pakistan (Budleigh Salterton, Devon: Interim Press, 1984). 39 pp. £2.40.
Alamgir Hashmi, *This Time in Lahore* (no place of publication: Vision Press, 1983). 65 pp. Rs 60, US$6.00.

The life signs in Jayanta Mahapatra's book are the expected ones, the archetypal symbols of religion and art, but given a sombre power by the bleakness and compassion of the poet's view. Water, the symbol of life and regeneration, appears in many of the poems, though in an ambiguous and often threatening way. In 'The Wound' it is an image of transience, for the wound in our souls (the terror and restlessness which assail us in the dead of night) makes us see how 'the applause of the stars,/ the existing structure of order' are 'traceless on the water'. By day we repress such knowledge, though the fear remains, acknowledged perhaps by the child, 'sacred relic,/ growing up with the helplessness and the generous tears', but faced by adults only in the nightmare images of folktale,

> the old terror of water where bleeding skeletons
> keep crawling through the mists,
> and the grey walls of our rooms.

Life signs are continually called into question, for they can no longer serve us unequivocally, as in the old way of religion, as symbols of transcendence. In 'Dead River' the river has lost its ancient spiritual dimension, it is a 'tamed temple god' and is likened to

> a father left with a picture
> of his traceless son, perhaps dead,
> grey with determination, and infinite skies.

Definitions of the river are mirrored in human terms of loss and helplessness.

'Firefly' contains the line 'what cry is it of the dead that refuses to be quiet?' and as in 'The Wound' we are plunged into shadows, darkness literal and spiritual, as well as into

the world of shades, ghosts. For the dead are inescapable in these poems, our consciousness of the past being part of the continuum in which we live, with 'the dim consciousness that everything/ perhaps is a dream' ('The Cannon'), yet a dream in which suffering and poverty go on. A rusted cannon from the Raj is 'graceless in the throes of history's nightmare'. The poems are anchored in our daily living, yet pass beyond the humdrum concerns of so much Western 'domestic' verse. Human life, the mind, nature, are used as fact and image in Mahapatra's poems, nature being explored at times in images derived from mind, while humanity is read constantly in terms of the natural symbols of the river, water, darkness and shadow. The poems are philosophical, not the mere recreations of mood and incident, though the touchstone for them is always the value of the lives of men, women and children, caught briefly in the world of pain and poverty.

'A Country' is Mahapatra's country, a part of Asia dominated by hunger, where 'the air is burnt' and 'incense and ash', sacrifice and death, predominate. Darkness again descends; in the night the old reminisce, but their eyes 'are dead as stone'. Childhood surfaces: 'Here is my world, and it makes me dream as a child'; yet he retains an adult's consciousness and sense of hurt at the meaningless deaths of the young. It is the sense of hurt that prevails, everything centres on the decaying, hunger-ridden land; the 'age-old myths' are told again and again, but no longer have the power to make sense out of human suffering.

The life signs glimmer fitfully in these poems. In 'Summer's End' the decaying season is also a season of the mind. It is night again, night which is imagined as an old and wrinkled face.

> A pariah dog howls at the front gate,
> the instant turns away
> like a practiced whore
> from one who loves her

— fine lines which image the lovelessness and loneliness of this world, where women are old, or cold-eyed whores of the back streets, or young girls dying before puberty, and before fulfilment, or more likely humiliation, in adulthood. The river, ancient life sign, is 'deep in the hills/ of my blood', but unreachable. The poet is helpless, 'I can do nothing for you, dear friend', for there is only the pity and the sense of aloneness. Darkness has a kind of solidity in these poems, but the ordinary events of day — women tarring a road, a barge of hay, lepers going home 'their helpless looks/ drawing fantasies on the town square' — these things seem unreal, or have a reality the poet cannot grasp: 'Even in the bright sun/ this was a world I did not know' ('Again, One Day, Walking By the River').

In this poem as elsewhere in the collection, images derived from the human are used as analogues for states in nature, which create disturbing and dream-like effects:

> It is two in the afternoon, and
> the heat of yesterday still clings to the old walls
> like harsh salt on the skin.

Nature and mind are freely interchangeable as analogues for one another:

> From the tamarind's shade
> I watch my loneliness come. Who would think
> it was like the wind that belonged nowhere?

('June'). Loneliness and a sense of desolation pervade the poems, 'I can't remember hearing anyone/ saying he will mourn for me when I am gone' ('Again, One Day, Walking By the River'), but *Life Signs* is not nihilistic like the work of Philip Larkin where, in the end, nothing is of value. In the blurb, Mahapatra is compared to Wordsworth. The differences between the two poets are profound, yet in one sense at least the comparison is just, for few poets in our century have evoked 'The still, sad music of humanity' so movingly as Mahapatra. This is a fine collection.

Evan Jones' *Left at the Post* centres on divorce and its aftermath, so that it might almost be termed a collection of genre poems, so popular has the subject been in the post War world. Some of these poems are good: 'Thinking of Suicide', for example, where a man eating at home alone thinks back to a threat of suicide he once made in an effort to keep the woman he loved. It didn't work, of course, and now he's glad, though still feeling the smart of 'sullen shame'. He imagines what might have happened if he had carried out his threat and swum out to sea... but he's not like that, and middle-aged acceptance recognizes the absurdity of the reverie:

> Only a passing thought: it makes him smile
> as Handel strikes out on a glorious tune.
> It's getting rather cold, it's rather late.
> No-one is there to watch him as he licks his plate.

The relationship of art to domestic grief is suggested in several of the poems. In 'Thinking of Suicide' the recording of Handel, half listened to while he eats, seems above the humdrum loneliness of the individual. In another good poem, 'Genre Painting', Jones suggests that such dispiritedness can only be captured by minor art. He reflects on a painting showing a man and a woman sitting in the gloom: 'It's an inconspicuous thing', yet it holds the attention sadly, for, the suggestion is, its 'dull meticulous rendering of grief' hints at our own unfulfilled lives, which must be lived out in confines rarely explored by great art with its 'bravura ... enhancing life'.

Other poems are less successful: 'Drinking with Friends', for example, where a low-keyed colloquialism

> It seemed
> to me I stammered, others talked: I'm damned
> if I can remember getting much of a hearing.
> My friends remember me as domineering.

is alternated with what is meant to be a bitter mock-Elizabethan refrain: '*Sing hey, sing hey for those yesterdays,/ the brilliant chat and its wanton ways....*' The ideal here and in several other poems is the taut witty style of Donne in which language approximating the colloquial is held in check by the demands of rhythm and rhyme. But Evan Jones is not able to sustain this, and the mundane language and the rhymes jar.

There is a sprinkling of light verse in the collection which might have been omitted. 'The One-Eyed Giant' is an updating of Arthurian romance in which the giant isn't a bad sort of chap, watches the 'telly' etc. Sir Cei and Sir Bedwyr, out on 'one of their admirable murderous quests', behead him, however, after being asked in to dinner, and the poem ends:

...while one loots,
the other plays and sings to his mandolin,
'It was all for the love of a lady.'
God knows why the poor bastard let them in.

It's the sort of poem that goes down well at a reading where no one wants anything serious, but such debunking is too easy.

In 'Poem just after midnight: summer: at home' are the lines

When
my bones are washed quite white, who will
remember my patient efforts to mimic
in words the smaller rhythms
of private life with its rewards and frustrations?
Somebody might.

Yet, the poem continues,

It hardly seems to matter
as I listen again for the wind to toss the trees,
the whole stir of a world
moving away.

In English-language poetry of the last forty years there has been an over-emphasis on the domestic, the small griefs of the individual. Great poetry captures that sense of 'the whole stir of a world/ moving away', but to do so means taking chances with your life and art. There are moments in this collection where Evan Jones shows what he might attempt beyond the rather easily accepted confines of minor poetry.

This River is in the South by Philip Mead is an ambitious collection which attempts a fusion of the sensuous with the intellectual where poems often use precisely evoked images of nature as a springboard for philosophical speculation. In 'Magnificence' the rain forest becomes a symbolic landscape of the mind, a primeval world where the 'I' is the first explorer, where maps lose their relevance, become sodden, 'the road like a blood vessel/ unwinding inwards through the fabric' — the fabric being map, body and mind. The idea is developed through a series of fine images:

Half the tree's roots are feeding on air, where
the bank has been leeched away. Or they

are flowing, clasping the four red chambers
of the heart and feeding their fabric.

Mead, however, extends the poem unduly by making explicit what has already been evoked through imagery:

What world are we walking in. Where the ways
out of time are brief and through language.

Where is the mind's place. I am saying it is
not here or here, but has its place in

metamorphosis, at the taking place, at
moments which are far from this one.

There is a tendency in these poems to talk about language, about meaning, in a way which is praised in the blurb for its modernity, but which often seems unduly self-conscious and even *passé* — the poem drawing attention to itself as artefact — done to death by a certain kind of American poetry in the post War period. Occasionally other arts are also used, to draw the reader's attention to the ways in which art, nature and human perception feed off one another. In 'Revisiting Monaro' are the lines

Against the sea-grey
morning sky, the cockatoos
are motionless strokes
of zinc white on bare branches.
They have been painted
in by Boyd.

The description is fine, giving exactly the visual quality of the cockatoos *and* their image in the work of a painter like Boyd: 'motionless strokes', 'zinc white' — everything necessary is here, and the last sentence is redundant, pointing too insistently, making sure the reader understands. The reader comprehends through the images, however, and the mention of Boyd merely makes his response self-conscious rather than luminous.

The problem is even more pressing in poems like *'Wisse Das Bild'* and 'Thinking and Speaking Are Different' which deal with language, meaning and perception overtly, and where Mead attempts philosophy but often ends with didacticism: 'But at the same time we can't turn this/ knowledge back on ourselves; that is the mistake.' Mead attempts here and elsewhere in the collection to create that interface between sensuous awareness, personal experience, reverie, aesthetic and philosophical speculation, which A.R. Ammons has made his own in the States. But it is a difficult achievement, and the danger is a species of earnest instruction, or a mish-mash of unconnected experience which, despite the blurb, doesn't always reveal 'surprising connections between apparently disparate states and experiences'. Ammons achieves this in his best work by a process of expansion, as in long poems like *Sphere* and 'Pray Without Ceasing', where the philosophy is almost smuggled in under the guise of the poet communing with himself or an ideal reader. Mead similarly needs to evolve a long poem to achieve his ambitions; in the shorter pieces of this collection there is a danger of foreshortening, of feeling the need to press home a point which comes close to hectoring. The lines I have just quoted from 'Thinking and Speaking Are Different' continue: 'Because we want to know it is like this, like that./ It isn't.'

In a poem like 'The Terrain', a highly successful reworking of the themes of 'Magnificence', Mead is more in control, content to let the images work by themselves, without the irritating need to explain:

Walk until your wrists are thin and brown
and your hands fanned out into ferns,

your hair lying along the backs of leaves.
At the end lie down and fill your mouth with earth
and feel your skull-plates shifting slowly

mending with birth Gondwanaland to continent.

In shorter poems this is all that is necessary. In attempting the philosophical poem, he needs to be at once more expansive and to have made clear to himself what precisely he wants to say. At any event the reader should not be bullied.

The centre piece of Syd Harrex's collection is the title poem 'Atlantis', a sequence of thirteen sonnets. The poem interlaces Atlantis as the preserve of scholars and archaeologists with the Atlantis of myth which survives in the imagination as a symbol of lost perfection, and also of the impermanence and uncertainty of human achievement. Harrex builds onto this his own suggestions of Atlantis as a symbol of the individual's quest for integration, a quest which makes living 'on an active volcano/ instead of safe ground' not an act of foolhardiness, but one of spiritual daring — a balancing perpetually on the edge of disaster which tunes the mind to a delicate pitch of awareness, lost to those who prefer to run from 'the way of lava risk'. The inhabitants of present-day Thera have this ability quite literally, 'knowing that devotion to volcanoes,/ like bull worship, is a fierce devotion', something they have perhaps remotely inherited, 'Some gift of Minoan sperm and soft speech?'.

As the poems proceed, the narrator whi is speculating on a friend's search for this balance at the edge of destruction, interfaces scenes from our civilization, contrasting erruptions of racial violence in London's Notting Hill with his, the narrator's, stay in a 'wholemeal suburb' with *The Times* and Haydn's music for company — symbols of a seemingly indestructible order. The surface of England, unruffled but decayed, appears as outcrop material in the poems: the England of 'politely bright British flowers', England 'in feeble slumber', waiting for rain.

The sequence also explores the relation of art to myth and to the utilitarianism that dominates our lives.

'Evil is the responsibility
of poets, not legislators,' he said,
'Is art moral? Should we live as legend,
or scansion of facts that form no picture?'

The answer is not easy: the human spirit needs myth to shape life, and Atlantis is or has been one such myth; but it can also be an escape. To seek in present-day Thera the old Atlantian perfection

the island he discovered was all symbols
of the necessary life contiguous
with myth: sculptured stone, cycles of woman
and death, peasant food and wine, Atlantis.

is to seek to live out another's myth, another's life. As tourists on the island they play at myth-making: his friend's girl becomes 'the Goddess of the Serpents/ and he the Prince of the Lilies', but 'Their hubris was to dare the bull's power/ to *uproot* their love, their deathless flower' (my italics). The perfection embodied in myth must be sought within,

and will always temper joy with sorrow, as in Michelangelo's statue of Moses, 'left profile sublime, the other torment'.

The sequence is complex in ways which it is only possible to hint at here, and in fact the concerns of 'Atlantis' inform the collection as a whole, which is largely set in Greece. 'Cotzia Square', for example, continues the debate on the myth-making function of the poet. Outside his bank there is a blind seller of lottery tickets, 'with eyes like painted stone' — 'he was my idea/ of a deity of commerce: perennial as financial fear'. One day though he is not there. The bank functions, impersonal and precise as ever, but a sense of disappointment overtakes the poet: the world has been reduced to computerized facts —

> Nothing failed — machine, nor mind —
> and yet I felt forlornly cheated;
> momentarily, quite blind.

Another example of the ways in which 'scansion of facts that form no picture' ('Atlantis') take over and deaden our lives.

One other poem which picks up shock waves from the 'Atlantis' sequence is 'And Agamemnon Dead', where the modern Athens of concrete and military oppression is contrasted with its historical and mythic past, the great city apparently deserted by its tutelary deity Pallas Athene. Most moving is part two which relates the tourist's encounter with the world of brute fact and his helplessness in the face of it. A bus is stopped by state police and a retarded boy is beaten into silence by his frightened father for gesticulating and trying to articulate something about the police.

> His father pulped him into whimpering silence,
> and offered the uniforms sycophantic homage.
> The gods were appeased by the sacrifice.

In other poems Harrex exhibits a tactile and visual imagination which can produce memorable results

> Good Friday Night:
> black wool
> of knitted people
> in a lemon dye
> of candlelight

('Easter in Athens') — but here the style is honed down, matter-of-fact, and precisely right for the moment. For the narrator is dumb, does not understand what has been said, yet understands its tragic import:

> I think that child
> was the enemy of the state...
> a conception of civilization
> his half-blocked mind could not understand.
> I think his bruised wet face told me surely
> of tortured Freedom, enchained, in prison.

Atlantis and Other Poems is well worth reading.

In Nigel Roberts' *Steps for Astaire* we are offered prose chopped up into quick-moving, fast-talking jive — verses which introduce friends and girlfriends ('Don', 'Annie', 'Sid', etc.), sex, modern jazz, Neruda, and poet-'mates' in a slick and familiar style. This is the Sixties world of the Liverpool poets and their American prototypes all over again, where everything may be, and usually is, debased for a laugh. The book is full of such memorable lines as

> the phone call said;
> get your dick down
> to the Clap Clinic

('The Conditions & Provisions for Leave') and

> Where I come from
> an invitation to dinner
> means come over & fuck
> & as I got out of the taxi
> I realized
> that I had forgotten my diaphragm
> & didn't bring a condom
> & he I knew
> hadn't had a vasectomy...

('Happy Hour in the Noe Valley Bar & Grill'). The blurb describes Roberts as 'the journalist of the id, the desperate reporter getting the facts, sending off despatches from the front — Balmain, San Francisco, Hollywood, and the various check-in points along the way'. Anyone who wants to be reminded of what the dated, and dented, 'in' attitudes of the Sixties were, should consult this volume.

The projectionist of the title of Philip Salom's collection is literally a film projectionist, an old man burnt in an accident in the projection room, who now spends his time watching silent films in his work shed; but he is also the poet, who projects images in words. Like Philip Mead, Salom attempts at times an ambitious philosophical poetry which discusses the nature of reality in relation to memory, art, aesthetics, the word. But only the greatest poetry can handle these themes with conviction, and usually only by indirection. When Mead writes philoophy/aesthetics the poetry tends to tip over into the abstracted and cerebral, describing a state of mind, rather than evoking it. In 'Valley' he presents an idyllic valley scene; everything is perfect, only 'a protagonist/ is missing'. Then three hikers appear and he notices 'bulldozer tracks in the sand'. His need for a cinematographic perfection is shattered; 'I burn the scene back/ free of men' — and the 'I' tries to evoke again his perfect images. There is good writing in the poem:

> Sunlight's
> fine crystal
> spills down the slope
> ...
> the river water
> is a slow fallen branch;

but the poem collapses at the end under the weight of an abstracting, philosophizing play on 'word' and 'world' which arises from the poet's desire to impart significance to the scene:

> I burn the scene back
> free of men,
> my melancholic sun
> comes back sound and image
> this alone protagonist, this
> word, slow branch
> of water
> come from nowhere
> spilling nowhere, this word
> first and last of the world
> continuing, delivering
> the heart
> nowhere.
> Paper-thin.

There are nonetheless good poems in the collection: 'The Killing', for example, which describes the projectionist (also the poet's landlord) killing a calf for the winter. There is a chilling precision and sensuousness here, as he describes the man skinning the animal as it hangs

> neck
> slashed, eyes' white madness
> dragging their sockets.

The man is oblivious:

> his eyes and palms
> move on the white selvage
> slowly — with near
> maddening slowness.
> Erotica of exactness.

Here the abstraction of the last line works because it is released from experience, rather than imposed by intellect, pinning down the pleasure of the man, and his skill which is both fascinating and slightly unnerving.

Salom is less in command of a sufficient idiom when he attempts overtly to explore inner states, as in 'Poet', about the disintegration of the psyche. It begins,

> On your images burn what I have learned
> of hatred. And when the head is torn apart,
> scatter the pieces to the morning
> knowing this must go on, night after night
> re-assembling.

For months I have terror
I tell no-one, go down into fear, submit
to the sodomites of ugliness.

The language is abstracted in a way which is a species of imprecision, very different from a line like 'Birds wheel/ at stone's absoluteness' ('The Coast'), where the abstract noun is used to body forth the massive solidity of the cliff, becoming in a strange way specific in the process. The one image is highly articulate, an embodiment of perception; the other remains cerebral, the description of a state of mind. Philip Salom should concentrate on the first.

Selected Poems provides a generous selection of Roland Robinson's work from his first collection *Beyond the Grass-free Spears* published in 1944 to *The Plum Tree* (1978). In the early poems there is a sense of Australia as a grand, unreal dream country for the white man, where the poet is isolated, an intruder. Such a land poses special problems for the artist — and here Robinson touches on what must be a major problem for Australian poets — for its 'otherness' demands a new language if it is to be adequately evoked. 'Black Cockatoos', a fine early poem, describes the jarring, raucous birds, and ends: 'So shall I find me harsh and blendless words/ of barbarous beauty enough to sing this land.' Robinson's poetic career has involved a successful search for such a language, which entails in the process a deepening of his understanding and commitment to the land.

Alienation nevertheless remains a powerful theme. In 'Would I Might Find My Country' blacks who seem at home as they set up camp for the night, are nonetheless displaced, a fact symbolized by the mission blankets among their gear; while the whites who supplanted them have never found the land. One way to do this might be through Aboriginal myths, but for a poet it's a way lined with dangers. The white comes to such myths at second hand, in translation from an alien language and culture. The result cn too often be like the European use of Greek and Roman mythology, stylized not internalized. This seems to me the case with Robinson in poems like 'Nerida and the Birwan' and 'The Water-Lubra', where there is a corresponding failure of language. So in the latter poem we read:

He heard, in a noon of silence,
when only the deep shade is cool,
voices and splashings and laughter
that came from a reeded pool.

We're close here to late-Romantic Australian naiads of the stream, and in fact some of the early poems do suffer from a weakness for Yeatsian Romanticism which can produce 'the swans/ passing in querulous cries against the stars' ('Call on the Sea to be Still').

Such influences were soon abandoned, though, and by the late 1940s Robinson had learned to trust his own senses, his own feel for Australia. This emerges in his awareness of the landscape as somehow anonymous, not owning to human connections like a long-settled land. In 'Orchid' the land seems to say 'be still, become inhuman,/ let your veins, as mine, lie cold'. The poet finds this attractive:

Where I pause and make this human
moan, and own myself outcast,

let me be, in alternation,
flower, and rock, and voice at last.

Only by accepting his alienation, a prerequisite to accepting the land on its own terms, can the white Australian poet find a true voice. Robinson himself achieves this with growing sureness in this selection, especially in a number of fine poems which evoke the life of the bush ('Lyre-bird', 'Rock Wallaby').

He achieves it also in a Wordsworthian sense of awe mixed with his perception of the land's beauty, and in his understanding of the atavistic fear nature can produce in man. In 'The Sacred Ground' he walks in the bush at night, at peace with himself and the land, until

The hills gave out a tread like sound:
primeval forms seemed crouching near;
ventured upon the sacred ground,
I felt myself gone chill with fear.

The best poems evoke these mixed emotions, 'Kimberley Drovers', for example, and 'The Fitzroy River Crossing', two longer poems, one concerning rest at night after a long day with drovers in the outback; the other about stumbling on an early prospector's grave marker; both suggesting transience, and how the whites have so little real communion with this land.

Poems of the late 1960s and 1970s deepen this vision. 'Wolf' describes a wolf-dog kept as a pet, but chaining, and beating when it kills a neighbour's goat, cannot beat the wolf out of it. Robinson recognises the untameable spirit of something wolf-like in man, too. In 'The Other' he suggests that at night, even in the tamed outer suburbs, something primordial rises in the mind. This is from the collection *Grendel* (1976), which succeeds in evoking the sense of the spirit, the untameability and the primitive fear, which Robinson (like Ted Hughes) sees as lurking behind the civilized façade of our lives. The transference of an Old English mythic figure, itself a symbol of untamed northern nature, to the new world, is powerful because Grendel is recognised as a kind of human other self. The fear we project without, and which in *Beowulf* is killed by the hero, is really something within: we 'kill' part of the self, or try to, for, like it or not, it is really something unkillable, irrepressible.

To an outsider, at least, these poems seem a true contribution to the creation of an Australian poetic sensibility.

Les A. Murray is another poet whose work in the past twenty years has created a genuine Australian voice. Writing in English this is more difficult than it appears. A number of poets in the post-War years, for example, reacted against the dominance of the English poetic tradition in Australia by running into the hands of the Americans. Like Robinson, though in a different way, Murray has chosen his own path, creating out of the multiple cultural resources open to him a poetry that is not Australo-English or -American, but distinctly Australian. His latest collection, *The People's Otherworld*, consolidates his achievement.

Many of the themes of previous volumes find expression here. Murray's very Celtic concern with family and ancestry, for example, surfaces in a fine sequence, 'Three Poems in Memory of My Mother', in which he comes to terms with his mother's death shortly

after a miscarriage, when he was a boy. It's there too in 'The Smell of Coal Smoke' which evokes memories of visits to family in grim industrial Newcastle during the war.

Murray is sometimes criticized for being a 'rural' poet at a time when the thrust of Australian culture is from the cities. This has always seemed to me a misconception, and poems like 'The Smell of Coal Smoke' and, more contemporary, 'The Sydney Highrise Variations', show him at ease with the city and the suburbs in his poetry. The latter is a sequence, one of the best in the collection, which deals critically with the destruction of a section of downtown Sydney to make way for fashionable American-style skyscrapers. The poem may be taken by some as anti-city in its attitudes, but it is not — only anti the monomaniacal drives of big business and its reduction of everything to profit. In fact 'The Sydney Highrise Variations' reveals Murray's sensitivity to the city, his ability to see an eerie beauty in its productions: the Gladesville road bridge, for example, seen from a distance, when

> the flyover on its vaulting drum
> is a sketched stupendous ground burst, a bubble raising surface
> or a rising heatless sun with inset horizons.

But

> Seen from itself, the arch
> is an abstract hill, a roadway up-and-over without country,
> from below, a ponderous grotto, all entrance and vast shade
> framing blues and levels.

Few poets in English have celebrated the city in this way.

Other poems are concerned with the country, of course, though as often with Murray, who comes from practical farming stock, it's the countryside put to use by man. So 'The Forest Hit By Modern Use' celebrates the great gashes left in virgin forest by timbermen, even down to 'bulldozers'/ imprinted machine-gun belts of spoor'.

Murray's most striking feature as a poet is his ability to create images in a seemingly effortless way which actually change our perception of familiar things. It's a gift few modern English-language poets possess — Ted Hughes has it in England and Seamus Heaney in Ireland — and it is one which informs the best poems in this collection with a memorable life, as in the description of a small boy impelling his scooter on a wet pavement:

> his free foot spurning it along,
> his every speeding touchdown
> striking a match of spent light.

The People's Otherworld deserves to be widely read.

The Blue Wind is a well-produced booklet intended to introduce to an English audience five Pakistani poets, all of whom should be better known in the English-speaking world. Daud Kamal's poems are in some ways reminiscent of the work of Jayanta Mahapatra: there is the same pervading sense of the transitoriness of life; a similar perception of the interconnectedness of the animate and the inanimate; a recognition of suffering as a measure of our lives. Kamal's poems are shorter, more concentratedly lyrical, however, depending

on the image as the vehicle for thought and feeling. The poems are often loaded with a barely contained violence and frustration which are projected onto the world:

> The vein
> in the sky's forehead
> swollen today
> will burst tomorrow

('Hoof-prints'). In another poem, 'For Those Who Hate the Moon', the 'I' sits across a dinner-table listening to a foolish woman who 'prattles on/ about the new architecture'. The next stanza jars the reader, cutting through the empty talk:

> Despite the screams of a pair
> of incestuous roses
> in a cut-glass vase
> I dream of embracing
> a new waterfall.

The 'I''s barely held equilibrium, imaged in the waterfall and clung to throughout the asinine conversation, is threatened with disintegration in this short poem's last stanza:

> It is throbbing again —
> the old vein
> in the back of my head.
> Look at those wolves
> coming down the mountain.

Other poems celebrate moments of peace, still points dependent on the transitoriness that elsewhere causes such near-despair. It's there in the fine poem which gives this anthology its title:

> Imagine how it is
> in the mountains —
> the sharpness of pine-needles
> and valleys green with regret.
>
> Chart the flight of birds
> on the night's migratory page.
>
> Clouds melt into one another
> and seeds sprout
> but the rocks stand apart
> asymmetrical in the torrent's rage.
>
> The grey salt of glaciers
> and the stars' inviolate beauty.

Adrian A. Husain is another lyric poet new to me who traces with a delicate touch the transient nature of our lives, though his tone is more elegiac than Kamal's. 'Kashmiri

Rug' celebrates the Edenic scene on an ancient rug, a world 'Bristling with animals', where 'The clearings trill/ with indelible birds'. It is beautiful, it is where we would like to live, and 'All echo a world once true'. But only

> A trick of the yarn
> keeps its colours fresh
> in the pale, antlered dawn.

Another good poem in this mode is 'Cairns' which describes prehistoric grave mounds on hilltops 'above the farm's fecund bustle'; places 'where villager or warrior went aground' (the image finely evoking the idea of ship burial with its hope of a voyage to another life, and ship-wreck seen from the blank stare of modern unbelief). The poem links with a modern instance: his father's white marble tomb which 'contains only clay', where his father 'makes a home/ among ghettoed neighbours'.

> How cannily he slips
> into their otiose habits,
> with what ease
> winnowing out his presence!

The lines etch out grief and scepticism in a delicately held balance, which is only troubled by the snatch of holy text from his tombstone which ends the poem: '«Ye that reject faith...»' ('Desert Album: Marble'). There are poems in other moods — a good animal poem, 'Crocodiles' — through the prevailing mood is movingly and memorably elegiac.

Mansoor Y. Sheikh is represented by only four short poems which are insufficient to allow a sure sense of his voice. 'Shalimar' continues the elegiac note — pools 'where jewelled fingers/ once caressed their own reflections', pavements

> where you can still
> sense a footfall
> or an occasional sitar crescendo
>
> from the bedchamber

evoke a lost world of grace and aristocratic ease, but all is past in a transitory world, for

> they do not take you
> through the inflexions of time
> to where the music swells and nights falter.

It is a good poem, and I would have liked a more generous selection of his work.

Salman Tarik Kureshi is represented by one longish poem, 'Delphi', which is more expansive in form than the lyrics of Kamal, Husain and Sheikh. It narrates a tourist's visit to Delphi, though a tourist with a poet's sensitive eye for detail, for difference:

> These mountains are not like ours —
> greyer, older, like folds in a quilt
> tossed down beside the ocean.

The visit, like most tourist trips, is anticlimactic: too many cars and buses, a confusion of races, anonymity, and everyone wondering why they came. When they finally arrive at the temple it is closed. Yet Socrates and Oedipus may have come this way and

> We join
> prince, shepherd, priest — the processions
> that have trod this path.

For the oracle, or what it stood for, is still valid; people still need its truths, though 'How few variations there have been/ on the tales foretold by the oracle!' They return in a drizzle of rain.

> The waitress in the Pan Taverna,
> who serves us Ouzo and Moussaka
> beneath vine-leaves trained over trellis-work,
> has a cold and a run in her stockings.

(Shades of Sweeney and Madame Sosostris.) 'Her tale too was foretold by oracles.' The poem is a memorable one, and again I would like to see a broader selection of Sheikh's work.

Of the five poets represented here, Alamgir Hashmi is the most Westernised in terms of poetic technique, something most evident in his latest collection *This Time in Lahore* where in many of the poems an expansive *vers libre* is coupled with a low-keyed colloquialism:

> I asked my old girl out.
> She gave me a four-year long
> look and put on her sun-glasses

('This Time in Lahore'). It is a style derived from American verse of the 60s and 70s. The title poem, about a visit home after several years' absence, evokes well the tensions in the poet's mind: friends and relatives urge him to stay; but military-governed Pakistan has become a world of lost connections for Hashmi who recalls a story his mother used to tell him of a prince who must journey 'in the valley of voices' where

> *he hears his name called*
> *from every foot-slab of distance*
> *behind him, but he must not*
> *turn back to listen.*
> *If he does, he will turn*
> *to stone.*
> *If he does not,*
> *he can keep on going.*

(Hashmi's italics.) The story is a parable of Hashmi's life: 'No prince', yet he is on a quest and can never turn back.

Hashmi has another style, with its roots in Eliot, Lowell and Dylan Thomas, a sort of Modernist-surrealism which to me is not so successful. Compressed imagery and literary allusion aspire to a portentousness which doesn't quite come off:

Now that morning is soiled,
and high noon's knock slides in
like the sun
carousing to the westward inch.
Here, then, everywhere,
I had evened Lord Weary to the Mills
and scared aloud a pair of sparrows

('Of Mirror-Certain Men'). Hashmi's best poems, like 'This Time in Lahore' and 'A Topical Poem', come out of the tension between his commitment to the West and his still deep familial and cultural roots in Pakistan: like the prince in the story he must go on, but with the voices of the stones sounding in his ears.

JOHN BARNIE

Idi Bukar, *First the Desert Came and then the Torturer.* Radical Arts, an imprint of the Department of English, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, Nigeria. £1.00 paperback.

Idi Bukar is a northern Nigerian poet in his mid 40s. *First the Desert Came and then the Torturer* is a linked sequence of terse political poems that purports to record the fictitious history of a place called 'That Country', a neo-colonial wasteland whose national resources have been squandered by a corrupt ruling elite on the modern equivalents of pacotile — those beads and mirrors the early European traders used to barter for ivory and slaves. 'The Country' is also blessed with a generation of cosseted intellectuals who stand back and watch the contemporary demise, wringing their hands, discussing, but never intervening in any effective way. The irony with which they are portrayed is typical of Idi Bukar's style. The poem is titled 'Necessity' and it begins

The marxists talked about necessity
the slowly flowing material of time
It had carried them
They were there
They left a table stacked with empty beer bottles
and shelves of truth
but had forgotten the necessity
of what was to be done

Eventually, inevitably, 'the generals took power' and a despot 'The Torturer' — takes charge of the troubled country. But his savagery inspires, at last, a true opposition in the chameleon-like figure of 'The Guerrilla', an urban terrorist who haunts the intimidated populace like a conscience.

First the Desert Came and tten the Torturer is really a contemporary political fable, an oddly fashionable genre these days, and reading the poem one is reminded of J.P. Clark's *Casualties* or the Caribbean poet Derek Walcott's 'The Star-apple Kingdom'. 'That

Country' could be any one of several African states in recent times, though some of the particulars locate it precisely as the author's putative homeland. The infamous massacre of Bakalori Dam, for instance, is unmistakably invoked in the poem 'River Valley'

> The foreign excavators came to flood their farms
> They put sand in the petrol tanks
>
> Then there were boots jumping down from jeeps
> and guns killed them through their own doorways
> more than three hundred of them
>
> The rest stared across the water of a lake.

Idi Bukar is clearly a poet of some stature; the poems bristle with outrage and despair, yet the writing is tense, incisive, lean. In the context of sub-Saharan Africa the metaphors of the desert and the torturer stand for both natural and historical experiences of drought and destruction; that they are shown to be apt and powerful symbols for an account of the contemporary situation in the region is a telling indictment of the times.

One understands why, given the political climate, Idi Bukar should choose to disguise — however thinly — the identity of 'That Country'. One wonders, though, if the subterfuge hasn't been taken a stage further in the prudent adoption of a pseudonym? Idi Bukar's work doesn't appear in any of the anthologies of African verse, nor in any of the literary periodicals, yet he is clearly an accomplished poet, fluent in all the techniques of his craft. Maybe he — or she — fears, like the Guerrilla in the poem, that things have reached the stage where, 'once you identify yourself// you become invisible'. Perhaps he's wise to stay in his metaphorical Sabon Gari, the strangers' quarter, and observe the society's 'drama in old clothes' from that vantage.

Certainly, pseudonymous or not, *First the Desert Came and then the Torturer* is urgent reading both for those interested in the poetry of Africa and for anyone concerned with the condition of Nigeria now.

STEWART BROWN

Njabulu S. Ndebele, *Fools and Other Stories*. Ravan Press, 1983. 280 pp. £3.95.

Fools and Other Stories was co-winner of the 1984 Noma award. The reasons for this choice are obvious. The collection is a near-perfect example of the black South African short story, and by virtue of that it defines the space, subject matter and style which make this category a recognizable genre within the wider categories of African literature and the short story. It shares its themes and setting as well as many of the sentiments with the autobiographies of growing up in the township, but it brings a care for even the minutest details of style and language which gives immediacy, freshness and emotion to even well-known themes.

The autobiographical genre has its own rules, and these are observed by writers like Mphalele and Peter Abrahams: First the author's young self is unaware of grown-up reality, mainly racial oppression, and he describes the world around him as seen through innocent eyes. The township is generally a warm and safe place, occasionally disturbed by references to street violence. This innocence is broken, usually by the protagonist being subjected to an act of racial humiliation, and after that there is educational advancement, political awareness and rage, and final escape to the free world. All the stories in the volume except the title story take place within a narrow range of this spectrum. Told either in the first-person or the third-person narrative, the protagonist is a school boy of an age just on the brink of adolescence with its accompanying sexual awareness and rebellion — 'bravery meant forgetting about one's mother.'

In all the stories the boy is timid, nervous, weak and frequently humiliated, either by other boys or by his mother. He is set apart socially from the other boys in the township by virtue of his parents' education; the mother is a nurse in all the stories, and the father is a school teacher. The boy carries the weight of the manners and aspirations of middle-class parents, exemplified in one of the stories by him having to play the violin. Despite all these handicaps, each story celebrates a victory. He refuses to play the violin, he takes an unauthorized run in the rain, he is disobedient or he calmly sheds a belief in the supernatural ('The Prophetess'). Each story ends on a note of triumph and fulfilment. The story 'Uncle' ends not just on a note of triumph, but in a celebration of African township customs and life. 'And there is the gramophone, the trumpet, the concertina, the guitar, the mouth organ, the hooting cars, and the wedding song. And the *setapo* dance is raising dust into the air. And Mother is passing cool drink.... Oh, Uncle, everybody is here.'

The story celebrates the special uncle/nephew relationship of the author's culture. In a series of beautiful scenes the uncle teaches the boy all the values central to their lives: the role of the family, the ancestors' ethics, morality, sex and racial pride. With a minimum of pain the boy is carried into adulthood because of his boundless — and institutionalized — admiration of the uncle. His mother's more realistic view of the uncle reveals a picture of a complicated and at times difficult person, which saves the story from banality and gives the celebration credibility.

This sense of triumph is an unusual tone in black South African literature, and Njabulu Ndebele explained in a lecture, given at the Commonwealth Institute in November 1984 (see interview with Ndebele in this issue of *Kunapipi*), that he perceives this shift of emphasis away from protest and towards 'affirmation' as a new and positive direction in black South African literature. He dislikes what he calls 'the liberal academic view', according to which black South Africans are simply seen as suffering and in need of rescue, and he mentioned a series of interviews with black miners which showed that even their lives contained 'small victories', and that they 'saved their humanity' through them. These stories manage to convey the quality and importance of 'small victories' without glossing over the inhumanity of the system.

The title story of the volume, however, differs both in tone and persona from the rest of the stories. It is a first-person narrative, and the narrator is a fifty-year-old school teacher with an extremely inglorious past — including embezzlement of church funds and the rape of a school girl — and a miserable and humiliating present, despised by his community for his deeds. He meets a young idealistic and promising teacher, newly returned from college and — it turns out — brother of the girl he has raped. The two men strike up a relationship of hatred and unwilling affection, in which the older man sees the younger man as his own hopeful beginning and the younger man despises the older one for the mess he has made of his life, but at the samt time he has the seeds of self-

destruction within himself. What rescues them both, at least momentarily, is political action. The older man is personally cleansed by his silent courage in facing an agry Boer with a whip, but the young man is thwarted in his immature acts of protest, but continues defiant, if confused. Apart from anything else the two men come to represent the different attitudes to political action of two generations in South Africa, and it traces the inevitable radicalization in the younger generation. The life of the township, the school system, and the wider social system of apartheid are seen as intimately interwoven, and only political action can give back humanity to people who have come to accept living without self-respect as an inevitability. The theme of apartheid is not avoided, and the necessity of the struggle is taken for granted, but from that standpoint *Fools and Other Stories* does not protest, but analyses and affirms the goodness of existing black values.

KIRSTEN HOLST PETERSEN

David Helwig and Sandra Martin, eds., *Coming Attractions 2: Diane Schoemperlen, Joan Fern Shaw and Michael Rawdon.* Oberon Press, 1984. 139 pages. Cloth $21.95, paper $11.95 (Cdn.).

Coming Attractions 2 is a good example of the kind of publishing initiative that has stimulated the recent growth in Canadian literature. It is the latest of Oberon's annual collections introducing three new fiction writers, and though readers will not agree with all the choices, they will experience variety and a substantial enough sampling to allow some judgment of the writers.

Diane Schoemperlen's three stories are the least conventional in form, building as much on cataloguing and montage of vignettes as on narrative. They create an ironic social world of young adults in the 1970s, using the kind of stereotypes Margaret Atwood has sometimes moved sardonically among to good effect. The stories can be convincing, but rarely show enough sophistication for trenchant social satire or enough narrative interest to make the stereotypes come to life.

Joan Fern Shaw writes about urban (Toronto) childhood in the 1940s, and she resembles Alice Munro in exploring the edges of society, the edges of normalcy, the fraying edges of life which can reveal more than the smooth weave at the centre. Yet her stories are more optimistic. As David Helwig says in his introduction, 'we see a reversal of the usual picture of the victimized, sensitive child.' The child's sensitivity triumphs, finding not disillusionment and defeat but the unexpected human value in her experiences with a dying aunt, a survivor of the holocaust or a Jewish rag-picker.

Michael Rawdon has apparently been writing in Canada but publishing elsewhere for twenty years, and the two better stories collected here are set mainly in Spain. Both are distinguished by articulate, cerebral, authoritative narrative voices exploring a young man's emergence into maturity. The importance Rawdon gives to ideas is especially enjoyable in 'Bright Imago', which develops the greatest intellectual complexity yet has a haunting quality, probably because it calls forth some of the mysteries at the heart of Rawdon's characters without explaining them away.

Coming Attractions 2 contains nothing obviously Canadian, aside from a few place names. Nor does it show either startling novelty or modish affectation. It may be signifi-

cant that the three writers are all in their 30s and 40s. They write mature, well-crafted fiction, the more enjoyable because of the variety in their work.

DICK HARRISON

Conference Reports

New Writing in African Literature: the Historic Moment? London, 1-3 November 1984.

'New Writing in Africa: Continuity and Change' was organised by the Commonwealth Institute and the Africa Centre. This was an interesting conference. It set out to be different from the usual academic conference, if not in content, then at least in form, and the organizers — The Commonwealth Institute and the Africa Centre, both in London — aimed at a practical result in the form of a handbook for African writers, containing useful information about writers' groups, publishing, contracts, agents, copyright etc. The writers were very much at the centre at this conference or, to put it more precisely, the African writers, both those of international fame and the relatively unknown ones. There were no papers given by critics on the subject of African literature, but instead there were keynote addresses, given by writers, followed by panel discussions (also by writers) and general discussion. Apart from these, there was a series of workshops on themes ranging from 'writing for and by women' to 'criticism' to 'writing for the radio' and 'writing in African languages'.

After the official welcome very few white faces appeared in prominent positions on the programme. The conference entertainment consisted of a fine performance of Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Micera Mugo's play *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* by the Wazalendo Players. The play has attracted a great deal of attention in London, partly because of the Kenyan High Commission's attempts at having it banned, following angry questions in the Kenyan parliament. Both co-authors attended the conference, and they went on stage and took part in the defiant song which concluded the play. To sum up: we heard it from the horse's mouth.

What, then, did the horse say? Nothing surprising, really. It seems clear that the battle-ground of African writing has not changed significantly in the last five years, but perhaps the lines have been drawn up a little more sharply. The main areas of discussion and controversy (at times with a pinch of salt) are still the language question and the question of a universalist versus a particularist school of criticism. This may sound academic, but both areas are highly political, dealing as they do with African strategies in the battle against cultural imperialism.

An obviously embattled Ngugi wa Thiong'o gave the opening key address. He repeated his well-known criticism of the 'neo-colonial betrayal' by writers who write in English for a small urban élite and stressed the necessity of using an African language to convey an African experience. To him, identity is inextricably bound up with language. Modern African literature must have as its roots oral African literature, 'orature', and it must direct its message of liberation from neo-colonialism to the African peasants in a language which is theirs. Lewis Nkosi drew up the line of the counter argument sharply when he addressed Ngugi in Zulu. Ngugi's answer was translation. Nkosi's point was obvious, but behind the banality lies, I think, a real danger in Ngugi's approach: the writers would lose touch with each other as a writing community, or rather their degree of contact would be decided by the translation policy of publishers, likely to be Anglo-Saxon or multi-national, and those are surely forces into whose hands Ngugi would deliver no-one. His speech carried an almost prophetic conviction that the historic moment was ripe for a decisive change, and most writers who spoke during the conference felt compelled to give their opinion on the point. Micere Mugo, whilst basically agreeing with Ngugi, pointed out that there existed a group of mainly young writers who could not write in an African language, and she recommended 'lenience' towards such victims 'who had been robbed of their own language'. Timothy Wangusa from Uganda thought that if the writing was 'strong', the language was unimportant, thus creating a separation between message and expression which, if accepted, effectively undermines Ngugi's argument. The francophone writers were also divided, although they appeared to show more reverence towards the French language. Ahmed Sheikh from Senegal conceeded the importance of language in the process of decolonization, whilst Regis Fanchette from Mauritius was not fussy about which language he wrote in. This position appeared extreme in terms of a non-ideological approach, and the general feeling tended more towards Ngugi's point of view.

The critical controversy was a continuation of Chinweizu et al. versus Soyinka. Chinweizu was there, supporting his demand for a criticism which builds its concepts and its system of evaluation on local, tribal oral literature and rejects eurocentric claims to universalism in the form of structuralist, marxist or any other ism-based critical school. The two sides are, however, united in a wish for both cultural and economic liberation; what they disagree about is what exactly this constitutes. Emanuel Ngara from Zimbabwe who has laboured hard to contract a marriage between a marxist approach and his own interest in stylistic criticism (he is the author of *Stylistic Criticism and the African Novel* (Heinemann, 1982)) was not impressed with Chinweizu's ideas because he was doubtful about claiming traditional literature as a source for critical tools, as society changes all the time.

Women writers were much in evidence and contributed significantly to the success of the conference. There will be a presentation of the individual writers on the women's panel and a discussion of their work in the Summer 1985 issue of *Kunapipi*.

One of the highlights of the conference was a talk about the state of South African literature, given by Jabudu Ndebele from the University of Lesotho. He is co-winner of the 1984 Noma award with his collection of short stories *Fools and Other Stories*, and he stressed the importance of a movement away from protest and despair and towards a more self-assured affirmation of dignity and even 'small victories' in the description of life under apartheid. There is an interview with him as well as a review of *Fools and Other Stories* in the Summer 1985 issue of *Kunapipi*.

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